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SUBJECT: SERBIA: SUPREME COURT VERDICT IN 1999 ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT
OF OPPOSITION LEADER

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Serbian Supreme Court handed down verdicts on June 19 against 10 individuals, including the Milosevic regime's secret police commander and state security chief, for the 1999 attempted assassination of Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) head Vuk Draskovic and the murder of four of his associates. This was the fourth trial in this case and the first time the Supreme Court used its powers to try a case itself. One of the main defendants, Milorad "Legija" Ulemek, has already been convicted in the assassinations of former prime minister Zoran Djindjic and former president Ivan Stambolic. Although Defense attorneys decried the ruling as politically motivated, Draskovic unsurprisingly hailed it as historic. The Socialist party (SPS) was notably silent, in an attempt to renew its public image by distancing itself from the Milosevic regime and to avoid antagonizing likely coalition partner SPO. The verdicts are good news for a normally inefficient judiciary. End Summary.

Maximum Sentences for Key Defendants

¶2. (U) On June 19, the Serbian Supreme Court sentenced 10 individuals, including Slobodan Milosevic's special police unit (JSO--now disbanded), commander Milorad "Legija" Ulemek and Milosevic's state security chief Radomir Markovic, for the 1999 murders of four Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) officials and the attempted murder of SPO leader Vuk Draskovic. The court gave Legija, Markovic, and two other former JSO members, Nenad Ilic and Branko Bercek, each 40-year sentences and issued sentences ranging from 6 months to 35 years to the other defendants. The court found two defendants innocent for lack of evidence. Legija was previously convicted of the assassinations of former president Ivan Stambolic and former prime minister Zoran Djindjic.

¶3. (U) In October 1999, soon after Milosevic dismissed Draskovic as deputy prime minister for criticizing the regime's policies in Kosovo, JSO officers staged an accident with Draskovic's two-car motorcade. Draskovic sustained only minor injuries in the crash, but a high-ranking SPO member -- Draskovic's brother-in-law Veselin Boskovic -- and three of Draskovic's bodyguards were killed. Dragomir Milojevic, the chief judge in the five-member Supreme Court trial chamber, found that Markovic and Legija had planned and organized the incident.

Supreme Court Trial is Fourth in This Case

¶4. (U) The Belgrade District Court had tried and convicted Legija, Markovic, and some of the other defendants on three previous occasions. Each time the Supreme Court overturned the verdicts and ordered retrials, criticizing the light sentences and the acquittals of some defendants. In May 2008, the Supreme Court took the unprecedented but legal step of trying the case itself. The defendants -- except the three with the least serious charges and lightest sentences -- now have the right to appeal the ruling to the full Supreme Court.

Socialists Silent

15. (U) Markovic's defense lawyer Dusan Matic denounced the ruling as political, saying the Supreme Court's move to try the case itself showed that government had interfered in the justice system. Draskovic noted that the sentences were historic because it was the first time since 1945 that a chief of the secret police -- an institution previously considered untouchable -- received a maximum sentence. The Socialist Party (SPS), which was once controlled by Milosevic but is now in negotiations with the pro-European Democratic Party (DS) to form a new government, did not comment publicly on the ruling.

Comment

16. (SBU) SPS's silence is a good sign. The lack of reaction is likely part of the party's strategy to disassociate itself from the former Milosevic regime and rehabilitate its image. SPS may also want to avoid antagonizing the SPO, which is a member of the DS-led "For a European Serbia" ticket and thus a future partner in a likely coalition government. The stiff sentences and quick conclusion of the trial are also good signs that the judiciary -- known for working slowly and frequently handing out light sentences -- is taking such crimes seriously. End Comment.

PEDERSON